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Reactions of Faith Groups to Hate Speech on Campus and Subsequent University Responses

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REACTIONS OF FAITH GROUPS TO HATE SPEECH ON CAMPUS AND SUBSEQUENT
UNIVERSITY RESPONSES

RACHEL FELDMAN

HONORS PROJECT

Submitted to the Honors College at Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for graduation with

UNIVERSITY HONORS, MAY 2020

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Mr. Jay Jones, English Department, Advisor

I. Introduction

The idea for this project came from a multitude of events in my life and the lives of my friends and family. Growing up as a part of a religious minority, I experienced hate and stereotypes from a young age, to the point where I assumed that everyone experienced these kinds of attacks. Local teenagers carved swastikas into my home and vandalized the menorah in the town square. These anti-Semitic acts made me feel completely alone and isolated, especially when the town did not directly address them. My faith did not play main part in my college decision, but when I left my hometown to come to Bowling Green, I thought that perhaps people's ideas about minority groups would be different in a new environment. Then, in the spring of my first year, a White Supremacist group posted recruitment materials around campus, and while the administration quickly took down the posters and stickers, the effects were felt by myself and other minority students. This past year, Toledo made national news when the FBI arrested and charged a local man with planning to carry out an attack on two Toledo synagogues, of which myself and many of my friends are members.

Because of these experiences, I had observed few positive interactions between different faith communities. I had not seen many examples of respectful, meaningful discourse between people from different faith groups. I first encountered the idea of a collaborative interfaith program when I studied abroad in England. The program consisted of a multi-faith panel made up of representatives from Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religions, and each representative took turns giving a brief overview of his/her/their faith. The representatives then answered questions posed by the atheist group on campus. The hundreds of students who attended the event participated respectfully. To see this kind of diversity in a peaceful, educational environment gave me the start of my idea for this project. I wanted to promote this kind of

discourse on Bowling Green State University's campus as well. Upon my return to Bowling Green, I realized that a similar event existed for the community, and I became a part of the Interfaith Breakfast committee, which hosts sporadic informational panels of people from different faith backgrounds, as well as an annual breakfast event.

I had seen so much hatred directed towards people from different faith groups, and I began to wonder how we could build bridges between people to combat that hatred. I reflected on my experiences at college. Had other people experienced some of the same events as I had on campus? Were they comfortable with expressing their faith, or were they worried that their faith would provoke negative reactions? After looking into previous research, I realized that many studies exist on the experiences of racial minorities on college campuses, but very few include religious minorities. This gap in university research provided an interesting niche, hate speech towards different faiths, in which to conduct research.

This project was in large part an extension of these questions. No student should feel threatened on campus because of their faith. However, we do not live in a perfect, inclusive society, and it was important to both acknowledge students' experiences with hate and to address their concerns. This study focused on students of many different faiths who have experienced hate speech on campus. It also addressed past university responses to these incidents and whether students felt supported by these efforts. I also wrote a letter to the Dean of Students summarizing the findings of this study and offering suggestions on ways that the university can improve the response to religious hate speech.

II. Research Questions

When I began this project, I hoped to answer the following research questions: Have students experienced hate speech on campus that was directly linked to their religious

preference? Does Bowling Green State University need to change its reaction towards hate speech on campus?

III. Literature Review

i. National Precedent

For over a century, society has acknowledged that speech can cause emotional and psychological damage. Hate speech, then called racial ridicule, first emerged in the American consciousness at the turn of the twentieth century. Jewish and African Americans supported laws that censored negative stereotypes in media and advertising (Kibler). They feared that negative portrayal in the media would damage their social standing and political efficacy. With the arrival of World War II, concerns over Nazi ideology led several states to pass group libel laws, another term for hate speech, which prevented the spreading of any false materials that promoted hatred of people based on race or religion (Kibler). The censorship of films was legal until 1952, when the Supreme Court declared that this kind of censorship violated the First Amendment. However, the Supreme Court also upheld the group libel laws in 1952, and they are still upheld today (Kibler).

There is no legal definition for hate speech, which has led to a lack of consistency in the outcome of court cases dealing with the subject. Hate speech is also referred to as “bias incidents” in university conduct codes and is protected by federal and state constitutions (Garlick). Hate crimes, also known as bias-motivated incidents, are “a criminal offense – designated by statute – specifically and intentionally targeting an individual or property in whole or in part because of the victim’s actual or perceived race, religion, national origin, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability”

(Garlick). Perpetrators of these crimes are not protected by the First Amendment and can be tried under a court of law. This project was primarily concerned with hate speech and bias incidents, rather than hate crimes; however, both types of incidents served to inspire the project.

When I first began considering the viability of this project, I began to research national and local incidences of hate speech, specifically those that targeted a certain religious person or group. Nationally, hate crimes committed against an individual because of their faith have been on the rise over the last three years, according to the FBI's latest report ("Incidents and Offenses"). Of these religious hate crimes, 58.1% were anti-Semitic and 18.7% were anti-Muslim. Hate crimes in general rose 44 percent from 2014 to 2017. Some attribute this uptick to political issues--for instance, Donald Trump's "Muslim ban" may have sparked a wave of anti-Muslim sentiment. (Pitofsky). This may have empowered those with more extreme views to act out. The 2016 presidential election may have been another cause for the increase. Another possible cause is a nationwide demographic change. Minority groups are growing, which may cause the majority to feel threatened (Pitofsky).

ii. Local Precedent

Local trends also show an increase in hate crimes. According to an article from the *Toledo Blade*, hate crimes reported to the police in Northwest Ohio doubled from 2013 to 2017 (Dunn). In the past several years, there have been multiple incidents that have affected the Bowling Green community and BGSU students directly. In 2012, a man plead guilty to starting a fire at the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo, a mosque which many BGSU students attend (Blake). Less than a year later, in 2013, the authorities

arrested a Bowling Green man for storing ammunition and weapons behind Woodland Mall. The man was a neo-Nazi and had been tracking local Jewish and African-American leaders for an unknown reason (Walsh). In 2018, the FBI arrested a man who was plotting an attack on the Toledo synagogues, which BGSU students attend (“FBI: Holland Man Arrested, Accused of Plotting to Bomb Toledo Synagogues”). These incidents are indicative of the continued issue of hate crimes in the areas surrounding Bowling Green.

Incidents on campus also appear to be on the rise. In 2017, a white supremacist group posted flyers and stickers around campus. The University took down the paraphernalia and released a statement stating that while the group had the right to free speech on campus, defacing University property was against University code (Dupont). The statement also encouraged students to use the BGSU Bias Reporting System to officially report any hate speech or actions on campus. The Bias Reporting System reports are available online to the public and give a summary of the incident and the university actions taken. Three of the thirteen incidents reported in the fall of 2018 were characterized as anti-Semitic (“BGSU Bias Reporting System”). Students reported two more anti-Semitic incidents in the spring of 2019. This is an increase from the prior three semesters, during which students reported no religious hate crimes. It should also be noted that not all students may have reported religious bias incidents or known about the Bias Reporting System.

iii. National University Policies

I looked to research of other universities’ policies on hate speech in order to prepare possible outcomes and solutions of this project. Overall, studies have shown that

college students with Christian backgrounds have the highest overall satisfaction rate with their college experience, while those with no religious affiliation have the lowest satisfaction rate (Bowman and Smedley). The researchers attribute these differences to a couple of possible influences: the sense of community created by religious groups on campus and the prevalence of Christian imagery on many college campuses. The authors also note the limited research on religious diversity on college campuses, possibly because it is not as noticeable as race or gender (Bowman and Smedley). Because of this limited research base, I expanded my search to general hate speech guidelines, rather than those specifically addressing religious hate speech.

In an article written specifically for college student affairs practitioners, the authors comment on how hate speech has extended from physical actions to combination cyber bullying. They also comment on the lack of federal legislation dealing with these kinds of incidents, leaving each university administration to create its own procedures (Harris and Ray). United States' law requires that universities have areas in which free speech is permitted; at BGSU these exist outside of the Student Union and the Education Building. However, some universities, like the University of Michigan and the University of Pennsylvania, have instituted controversial speech codes that some say violate the First Amendment. Opponents of the speech codes argue that by banning certain words, phrases, and ideas, the universities are infringing on students' free speech. The often cited alternative to speech codes is "counter-speech": Speech or actions that counteract hate speech. A law professor at Loyola University Chicago studied Supreme Court cases dealing with hate speech as well as different campus policies on hate speech. The author argues that case law suggests that counter-speech is not enough on college campuses, and

that the states have the prerogative of establishing their own standards. The author argues that counter-speech is often not enough to stop the spread of hate speech, as it does not stop people from making hateful remarks. Often, it even brings more attention to hate speech, which can in turn encourage further hate. The author comments that academic consequences for hate speech on campus are not the same as criminal consequences. Therefore, campus investigations and consequences involving hate speech do not have to follow criminal procedures. Thus, there can be academic consequences for disseminating symbols that are historically meant to intimidate, while there may be scant evidence for a criminal charge (Tsesis). This can be a drawback to the system, as academic charges rarely go on a student's permanent record and ultimately have less severe consequences than a criminal charge. Overall, Bowling Green State University's general policies reflect this ideology.

iv. Bowling Green State University Policies

Overall, Bowling Green State University is more diverse than the average university. In a report by College Factual from September of 2019, Bowling Green State University scored a 66 out of 100, whereas the average across the United States is 60.66 ("How Diverse Is Bowling Green State University - Main Campus?"). Factors considered included ethnicity, gender, and geographic origin of students and faculty. Roughly 77% of students are white, 9% are African American, and 4% are Latinx. 56% of students identify as female, while 53% identify as male. 87% of students are from Ohio—only 5% of students are international students ("How Diverse Is Bowling Green State University - Main Campus?"). The campus is slightly more diverse than the town of Bowling Green. Roughly 88% of the residents are white, 6% are African-American, and 1.5% are Asian.

About 52% of the residents identify as female and 48% identify as male (“Bowling Green, Ohio Population 2019”).

The national debate over hate speech policy is present on BGSU’s campus as well. After staff members discovered a White Supremacist group’s advertisement on campus in 2017, two different editorials appeared on BG Falcon Media, the online portion of the campus newspaper. These two editorials present two different arguments on University policy. One author argues that everyone has the right to free speech, even if their viewpoint is detestable. She argues that students should use counter-speech should to counteract hate speech, rather than restricting types of speech through speech codes (Scebbi). The other author argues that groups that spread hate should not be allowed to promote speech that is meant to subjugate people of color and people of other faiths. The author argues that engaging with people with these kinds of viewpoints only encourages them and spreads their message to a wider audience. While the author acknowledges these groups’ First Amendment rights, she states that she still does not want to see these groups on campus (Siegel). While not the only opinions, these two editorials summarize the most prominent positions in the hate speech debate. The presence of this debate on campus shows student interest in current university policies which addressed in this study.

There is a specific reporting system already in place at Bowling Green State University. The administration encourages students to report any incidents of hate speech to the BGSU Bias Reporting System, an online, publicly-available resource available through the Division of Diversity and Belonging. If a student experiences hate speech, they may report the incident online by filling out an incident response form or by calling

the “See it. Hear it. Report it.” hotline. Once an incident of bias has been reported, the Dean of Students and/or the BGSU Police investigate the incident. If the perpetrator is found, they “will be held accountable through criminal charges and/or discipline by the University in accordance with the Student Code of Conduct” (“BGSU Bias Reporting System”). The reports on the system are then updated with what actions were taken by the University. All reports are anonymous.

Actions taken by the University in response to reports of bias incidents over the past few years vary based on the incident that occurred, where the incident occurred, and the severity of the incident. The only incidents reported to the BGSU Police were physical vandalism, which were also reported to the office of Residence Life. When repeated incidents occurred in a residence hall, the hall director held meetings to discuss the incidents. In the few cases where the perpetrators were found, they were charged through the student Code of Conduct (except in cases of vandalism, as mentioned above). For off-campus incidents, the Dean of Students would reach out to the student who reported the event for more details. The Office of the Dean of Students always followed up with any student who made a report and offered support services like counseling and support groups to victims of bias incidents (“BGSU Bias Reporting System”).

The Division of Diversity and Belonging has been going through major updates over the past few years. Several committees dedicated to diversity and inclusion exist on campus, including the Student Advisory Council in Diversity and Inclusion, and the Dean’s Advisory Council on Diversity and Inclusion. Each committee is dedicated to “supporting the University’s diversity, inclusion, and belonging goals and initiatives” by giving a platform to minority students and faculty (“Division of Diversity and

Belonging”). The University has also started to overhaul its policies on inclusion and diversity, which has included outreach and training for faculty, appointment of new division heads, and increasing support and accountability measures. Despite these steps, the progress report published by the Division of Diversity and Belonging indicates that “less than 60%, but more than 35% of the campus community has a positive perception of the campus climate”, indicating that further changes may need to be made for student perception to improve (“Division of Diversity and Belonging”). Overall, the University is taking steps to support inclusion and diversity, but with limited results.

IV. Methodology

I had admittedly little experience in the fields of sociology and psychology; however, I knew I wanted to prompt a conversation between people of different faith-groups who would rarely interact on a day-to-day basis. The idea of a cross-cultural conversation is supported by the philosopher and cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah, who argues that these kinds of conversations are inevitable in a quickly changing world, and that “...conversation doesn’t have to lead to consensus about anything... it’s enough that it helps people get used to one another” (85). Appiah also dedicates a portion of his book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006) to the differences in each society’s values and how we can recognize these values and continue a conversation. This was an important chapter for this project, as each religion carries its own set of values that may conflict with another religion. Thus, it is important to focus on the values shared between religions and the morals that connect us as human beings.

Because I wanted my research to focus on a conversation, I decided to use the focus group method, rather than an anonymous survey. I created the ideal group sizes, times, and places based on previous research that specifically focused on college students (Billups). Basic

demographic questions and formats for closed and open-ended questions I drew from *Asking Questions: the Definitive Guide to Questionnaire Design* (2004), which, although written for questionnaires and surveys, provided a useful template for a novice researcher (Bradburn, Norman M., et al). The biggest hurdle in using focus groups was my inexperience in facilitating discussions, especially over sensitive topics. One suggestion was that teachers who were moderating discussions on controversial issues should set up their space so that all students felt equal. The same article also suggested that facilitators should start a conversation with a broad initial conversation, then move to tougher topics (Ezzedeen). Another author suggested that a facilitator should be knowledgeable about outside context that may influence participants, as well as the facilitator's own biases (Hopkins). My belonging to a minority religion may influence how I pose or respond to a question or comment and being aware of these biases ahead of time may help to counteract any influence on the research. However, coming from a minority background also gives me unique insight and empathy into some of the negative experiences that others have had, which may make it easier to facilitate discussion around difficult topics.

In order to best understand students' experiences on campus, I led a series of three focus groups. I recruited students for the focus groups in several ways. I reached out to some of them personally, as I knew them through campus organizations and classes. Others responded to an open invitation sent out through the Honors College and Campus Update. Some students also were made aware of the focus groups through emails sent out to the major faith groups on campus. All participants had snacks during the focus groups and received a \$5 gift card upon the focus groups' completion.

The first focus group involved three students, the second focus group involved one student, and the third focus group involved four students. These focus groups contained participants from

different faith groups, namely Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Agnostic, and Unitarian Universalist. By having students from different backgrounds in the same group, I hoped to promote an open dialogue about their experiences and an honest discussion about the University's policies that students may not want to share with those from their own faith. During these focus groups, I asked specific questions about the participants' faiths and experiences with hate speech on campus, as well as their opinions on the University's responses to these incidents. The questions asked may be found in the Appendix. Each focus group lasted for less than an hour and took place in the campus library. I recorded the conversations so that I could better analyze the participants' answers after the fact. I then used the conversations and interview to determine if students felt that the University's current policies are satisfactory.

There were definite limitations to this study. Unfortunately, the device used to record the focus groups broke before I made transcriptions for two out of the three groups. Fortunately, I had taken notes on important points, general themes, and key quotes from the missing recordings. The transcription that I was able to salvage was for the third focus group. The third group's conversation was the best example of interfaith discourse and had the greatest number of ideas for ways the University could improve their policies. I have included the complete transcript in the Appendix. While the loss of the other two recordings is unfortunate, it did not undermine the outcome of the study, as the thoughts and opinions of all the participants were still used to draw conclusions about the University's overall policies and possible improvements.

Another limitation was the number of people who could have participated. I limited each focus group to a maximum of six students, and with five possible focus groups, the greatest number of students who could have participated was 30. The total number of students that participated was nine. This is only a very small sample of campus, and therefore I had to be

careful when generalizing my results. However, this is not a widely researched area of study and this research can help lay the groundwork for other research like it. Another limitation of this study was the likely probability that I would not reach every faith present on campus. Although I reached out to major faith organizations on campus and to the general BGSU community through Facebook, I realize that I have not included all faiths in these lists. Unfortunately, I was unable to have any students from Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu faith groups participate in the focus groups due to a lack of response. These are faith groups that would have brought a different perspective to the focus groups, as they may have experienced not only hate speech aimed at their faiths, but also cultural backgrounds. However, I tried to make the focus groups as diverse as possible so that I can best see as many perspectives as possible. The faith groups reached in these focus groups included: Christian (Protestant), Catholic, Jewish, Agnostic, and Unitarian Universalist. Ideally, if a similar study were to be completed repeated in the future, then the inclusion of students from other faiths outside of this limited group may produce a broader picture of the challenges faced by students on campus.

V. **Results**

The three focus groups took place in Jerome Library throughout the month of April 2019. The first focus group had three participants, the second interview had one participant, and the third had four participants. All students were undergraduates ranging from sophomores to seniors. The following are results for each question asked during the focus groups.

i. What is your religious preference?

The first focus group had three participants—two students who identified as Jewish and one student who was raised Christian but now identifies as Agnostic. The second focus group consisted of only one student, who identified as

Catholic. The third focus group had four participants—two who identified as Protestant, one who identified as Episcopalian, and one who identified as a Unitarian Universalist.

ii. Does a religious group for your religion exist on campus, and if so, would you consider yourself to be a member?

Three of the nine participants reported that they were active members of a religious group on campus. Both Jewish students belonged to Hillel, the Jewish student life organization. They both stated that they attended bi-weekly Shabbat dinners and monthly events. The Catholic student reported that she belonged to the Catholic student organization and attended weekly services at a nearby Catholic church. Organizations existed on or near campus for all the other participants' faith; however, they stated they were not members of these groups.

iii. How would you, yourself define “hate speech”?

Almost every participant identified hate speech as speech that “defames or defiles another person based on some identifiable factor be it race, religion, creed, sexual orientation.” However, in the third focus group, there was a short debate about personal definitions versus legal definitions. One participant pointed out that “legally, the Supreme Court has refused to recognize as there being a definition of hate speech.” Participants did not make this distinction in the other two discussions. The third focus group also brought up an interesting point on why the participants' personal definitions could not be used in a court case. The participants in each group then proceeded to use their own definitions of hate

speech as a frame of reference for the following questions and remainder of the discussion.

- iv. Based on your response to the previous questions, have you, yourself experienced hate speech with respect to your religious preference on campus? If so, how?**

Out of all the participants, only two recalled any experiences of bias caused by their faith, although neither participant classified the incidents as “hate speech.” Both were from religious minorities. One participant stated that she had encountered difficulties expressing her faith because she “didn’t look Jewish” due to her Asian background. She also had experienced friends making stereotypical comments due to her background like “she should be good at math” or that she was cheap. The other participant stated that while she had not experienced any incidents she would call hate speech, she has “had people thrown off by [Unitarian Universalism] because they don’t really know what it is.” Neither participant identified these experiences as hate speech based off their personal definitions, as they felt that the intention behind the remarks was not malicious. Therefore, they did not report the incidents. However, they did find the experiences off-putting and awkward.

- v. Have you, yourself seen or been aware of any actions taken by the university to address hate speech on campus? If so, what?**

All the participants believed that the university has done “a good job of calling out hate when it sees it” with respect to addressing hate speech on campus. Participants noted that the university had taken down hateful graffiti in elevators

and residence halls, as well as sent out emails and social media statuses to inform students of incidences on campus. One participant mentioned the group Not in Our Town, an organization that promotes diversity and inclusivity both on campus and in the town of Bowling Green. Two of the focus groups mentioned “Bible Bob” and other similar groups speaking in the Union Oval and outside the Education building. And while the participants noted that “Bible Bob” had said some hateful things, most agreed that “[the university is] pretty open about free speech, so they let him do his thing.” Another participant noted that not allowing groups like this on campus could be a violation of free speech. When asked about what participants had seen as far as University reactions to hate speech, only one participant mentioned the BGSU Bias Reporting System and “See it. Hear it. Report it.” However, when asked how one might access these services, the participant seemed confused and stated that “[he] actually [had] no idea”.

vi. Do you, yourself have any suggestions on how the university may better address hate speech on campus? If so, what?

Despite the overall positive outlook of the participants, every focus group provided different suggestions to improve or strengthen the University’s policies and procedures. One participant mentioned that at her previous college, the Dean of Students had sent out informational emails about different major religious holidays and stated that “it helped me learn about other people different from me.” Another participant suggested creating a BG Perspective course like the current Honors Introduction to Critical Thinking Course. In this course, students would learn how to have civil discussions on controversial topics while a faculty

member mediated the conversation. This course could also become an option for a section of Honors 1910. A similar suggestion from a different group involved an event or series of events that would host guided conversations on hot button issues. Two participants from different focus groups mentioned the mandatory alcohol and sexual assault training that incoming students complete. One participant suggested “[the university] could have every freshman coming in watch the videos [on diversity] and do a module on that and learn about it.”

VI. Conclusions

Overall, the students interviewed in the focus groups were content with Bowling Green State University’s current policies on hate speech on campus. Only a couple of the students had had negative interactions with others because of their religions, but even these individuals had not felt the need to report the interactions, as they did not feel they had come from a place of malice, but rather ignorance. This distinction was important to those participants’ definitions of hate speech. This is also a distinction made in various official definitions of hate speech and bias incidents. The students expressed confidence in university responses to more general instances of hate speech in the past academic year, including notification by email and through social media. Continuation of this kind of open communication between the administration and the students makes the students feel safer and more informed.

Despite the overall approval of university policies, students still had recommendations for improvement. One such recommendation was to send out emails about major holidays celebrated by the different faith groups represented on campus. Occasionally, information about upcoming holidays appears in the daily Campus Update; however, this information only appears if a student organization submits it. This would make it easier for students to learn about the different

cultures on campus, as they could read about important events and then attend them if they are interested in learning more. For example, the Office of the Dean of Students or the Division of Inclusion and Belonging could send an email about Ramadan that describes the holiday and traditions. The email could also include links to the Muslim Students' Association so that students could learn more if they wanted to. This would be an easy and inexpensive program to implement; however, its reach would be limited, as it is unlikely that many students, including those who did harbor hateful thoughts, would read these emails.

Another suggestion was to add a module on diversity to the required online training for incoming first years. There is precedent for these types of courses—universities like the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Indiana State University already have implemented such courses by DiversityEdu, a company that creates online programs for students and faculty (“Skills for Inclusive Culture”). However, it could be hard to determine the effectiveness of these courses, as the website does not state what comprehension scores students need to pass. Therefore, several courses may have to be tested before actual implementation to ensure that they are effective. This could take several years, and more immediate solutions may be more feasible. Students may also resist having to take additional courses before the start of school, and it would be hard to motivate current students to take the course. This solution is also more costly than some of the other recommendations.

The last recommendation was to create a BG Perspective course or hold an event that would promote civil discourse on controversial topics. These ideas are similar to courses already in place for Honors College students, and the event is similar to Great Ideas and Desserts, also an Honors College event. Non-honors sections of the Introduction to Critical Thinking course could be offered to BGSU students outside of the Honors College to fulfill credits as BG Perspective

courses. However, this would involve either hiring or training a faculty member to teach the course, which could be costly. An alternative could be events that promote civil discourse held on different topics throughout the year. Students could have discussions in small groups moderated by a facilitator or faculty member. Perhaps a certificate could be offered to those who participate in all the discussions. But, as with the idea of a new course, the University would need to recruit faculty members to lead such events, which may not be feasible.

I have written a letter and submitted it to the Dean of Students detailing the findings of this study and the recommendations given by the participants. This letter is not a criticism of university policy—it is merely meant to inform the university of student satisfactions and areas for improvement. Because of the small number of participants, one needs to be careful when generalizing these findings to the entire student body. My hope is that this study will be a stepping-off point for other research on similar topics. I also hope to promote civil conversations between students of different backgrounds about hard topics. It is through these kinds of conversations that all parties involved can gain knowledge and empathy and build a bridge of tolerance.

As a researcher, this project challenged me in ways that I did not expect it to. I had to confront some of my own implicit biases about other faiths and stay open-minded to the opinions held by the participants. Each faith subscribes to its own ideas, and when those ideas differed from mine, it was hard to remain unbiased. For instance, in the second interview, the participant kept referring to Jesus as “the world’s Lord and Savior,” which does not align with my own faith. But that does not make her sentiments any less valid, nor her recommendations any less valued. Moderating these conversations was also a new experience and getting participants to open up about their thoughts and experiences was not always easy. Language and word-choice

proved to be as important as the questions asked, and I went through several drafts of questions before writing the set that I used. For example, in one of the initial drafts, I defined hate speech for the participants before asking for the participants' own definitions. However, this took away from the conversation aspect of the focus groups, and overall was far too specific. By leaving the definition of hate speech up to the participants, we were able to discuss the meaning of hate speech in legal and personal contexts. Working with other college students was a unique experience, and while recruitment proved harder than I imagined, the participants in this study were very open about their backgrounds and opinions even when they differed from the person sitting across from them.

This project has taught me a lot about a lot about the potential for civil discourse between people of different faiths, and by extension, different backgrounds. Talking about uncomfortable experiences and topics like hate speech and religion is not something that we do often and avoiding these kinds of conversations can lead to future negative incidents. Having these conversations is not easy, but it is necessary if we are to learn about others and begin to heal as a society. Since beginning this project, I have learned to be more open about my own experiences with hate speech and am continuing to help others learn about cultures and traditions different from their own. Silence will not help other victims of hate speech—it is important that they know they are not alone. The most important defense against ignorance and hate is knowledge, and by giving others the opportunity to broaden their education through discussion we can take the first step towards a more inclusive campus and community.

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Multi-faith Focus Group Questions

1. What is your religious preference?
2. Does a religious group for your religion exist on campus, and if so, would you consider yourself to be a member?
3. How would you, yourself define “hate speech”?
4. Based on your response to the previous questions, have you, yourself experienced hate speech with respect to your religious preference on campus? If so, how?
5. Have you, yourself seen or been aware of any actions taken by the university to address hate speech on campus? If so, what?
6. Do you, yourself have any suggestions on how the university may better address hate speech on campus? If so, what?

Participant Recruitment Letter

Subject Line: Multi-faith Focus Group Participation Request

Message Content:

Greetings,

My name is Rachel Feldman, and I am a third-year student in BGSU's Honors College. For my Honors Capstone project, I am conducting a focus group for my Capstone Honors Project on the experiences of students of different faiths with hate speech in respect to their religions. I am also studying the students' thoughts on Bowling Green State University's responses to these events of hate speech, and what, if anything, needs to be changed in these responses. The benefits of this study will be the increased awareness of these kinds of incidents, and if, based on the responses in the focus groups, it is determined that the university's response needs to change, a proposal will be written to the Dean of Students.

I will be holding 60-minute focus groups in Jerome Library. These focus groups will offer you the opportunity to provide me with your thoughts and opinions about your experiences, if any, with hate speech with respect to religion on campus and subsequent university responses. These focus groups will also serve as an opportunity for you to make suggestions about future university responses to similar events, if you have any. Each session will be recorded on my own personal recording device. After each session, I will draft a summary of the thoughts and opinions expressed by participants before deleting the recording. The date and time for each focus group is as follows:

- Focus Group 1: Tuesday, April 9th, 2019 at 7pm
- Focus Group 2: Thursday, April 11th, 2019 at 1:30pm
- Focus Group 3: Tuesday, April 16th, 2019 at 8pm
- Focus Group 4: Saturday, April 20th, 2019 at 4pm
- Focus Group 5: Wednesday, April 24th, 2019 at 8pm

There are some possible risks if you choose to participate in this focus group: some of the questions may ask you to recall potentially traumatic events, which may cause a negative emotional state. However, your decision to participate or to not participate will not affect any relationships you have within BGSU. Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and participants will receive a \$5 Amazon gift card upon completion of the focus group. If you plan to participate in your corresponding focus group, please respond to this Google Sheet: [Insert link here]. This solely serves as an opportunity to gauge the approximate number of participants prior to the study and make sure that the groups include participants of multiple faiths. The decision to participate or not to participate will not affect any relationships with BGSU or your position in any program. Attached to this email is the statement of consent that you will be asked to review and sign prior to your participation in the focus group.

If you have any further questions about my research, please do not hesitate to reach out to myself or my faculty mentor, Dr. Heath Diehl (email: williad@bgsu.edu, phone: (419)-

372-6836). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, please feel free to contact the Institutional Review Board (email: orc@bgsu.edu, phone: (419)-372-7716).

Best regards,
Rachel Feldman
rfeldma@bgsu.edu | (847)-778-8266

Letter of Consent



Honors College
024 Founders Hall
Bowling Green, OH 43403
(419) 372-8504

Student Researcher: Rachel Feldman
Contact: rfeldma@bgsu.edu | (847)-778-8266

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Heath Diehl
Contact: williad@bgsu.edu | (419)-372-6836

Institutional Review Board
Contact: orc@bgsu.edu |(419)-372-7716

I am a student at Bowling Green State University, and I am conducting a focus group for my Capstone Honors Project on the experiences of students of different faiths with hate speech in respect to their religions. I am also studying the students' thoughts on Bowling Green State University's responses to these events of hate speech, and what, if anything, needs to be changed in these responses. The benefits of this study will be the increased awareness of these kinds of incidents, and if, based on the responses in the focus groups, it is determined that the university's response needs to change, a proposal will be written to the Dean of Students.

This focus group is designed to be approximately 60 minutes in length and will be located within Jerome Library. While specific questions will be asked, please feel free to expand on the topic or talk about related ideas. This session will be recorded on my personal audio recording device. There are some possible risks if you choose to participate in this focus group: some of the questions may ask you to recall potentially traumatic events, which may cause a negative emotional state. Your decision to participate or to not participate will not affect any relationships you have within BGSU. If there are any questions you would rather not answer or that you do not feel comfortable answering, please say so and you may be excused from the focus group. If you continue to experience emotional stress or would like to report an incident, please do not hesitate to contact these resources:

BGSU Counseling Center: 419-372-2081
BGSU Bias Reporting System: 419-372-2843
BGSU Police: 419-372-2346

Data from the focus groups will be stored on my computer, which only I have access to and is password protected. Statements of consent will be locked in a file cabinet within my place of residence. Only I will have access to the recordings of the focus groups and the consent forms. All recordings will be destroyed after summaries from each group are finalized.

Participant's Agreement:

I am 18 years or older. I have been informed that my participation in this interview is voluntary. I have been informed of the intent and purpose of this research. If, for any reason, at any time, I wish to stop the interview, I may do so without having to give an explanation. I have been informed that the data will be used in this research project for a HNRS 4990: Honors Project Execution course in which the student-researcher is enrolled at Bowling Green State University. I have the right to review, comment on, and/or withdraw information prior to the project's submission. The data gathered in this study is not confidential with respect to my personal identity; however, no names or personal identifiers will be used in the final report of this study. If I have any questions about this study, then I am free to contact the student-researcher or the faculty advisor (contact information given above). If I have any questions about my rights as a participant, I am free to contact the Institutional Review Board. I have been offered a copy of this consent form that I may keep for my own reference.

I have read the above form and, with the knowledge that I may withdraw at any time and for whatever reason, I consent to participate in today's interview.

Signature of Interviewee

Date

Signature of Interviewer

Date

Participant Debriefing Letter

Thank you for taking part in this focus group. It is important to talk to students about their experiences on campus to make sure that they are getting the support that they need. The aims of this study were to gather information on the experiences of students of different faiths with hate speech in respect to their religions. The focus groups were also held to hear the participants' thoughts on Bowling Green State University's responses to these events of hate speech, and what, if anything, needs to be changed in these responses. I hope that this will help suggest ways that the university can support all students on campus.

The information you gave me will be held anonymously. The conversations had during the focus groups will be recorded on a private recording device and stored in a safe location. Once summaries are generated for each focus group, the recordings will be deleted. Consent forms will be stored in a locked safe. If you wish to withdraw your data from my study this can be done at any time. Please contact me if you wish to do so. If you think of any questions you would like to ask once the focus group is over, please contact me at rfeldma@bgsu.edu or (847)-778-8266. You may also contact my faculty mentor, Dr. Heath Diehl, at williad@bgsu.edu.

If, after the focus group has concluded, you wish to talk to someone about your experience on campus or would like to report an incident, please do not hesitate to call the resources listed below:

BGSU Counseling Center: 419-372-2081

BGSU Bias Reporting System: 419-372-2843

BGSU Police: 419-372-2346

If you have any questions about my rights as a participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board at orc@bgsu.edu or (419)-372-7716.

Thank you,

Rachel Feldman

rfeldma@bgsu.edu, (847)-778-8266

Interview Transcripts

Focus Group #1: April 9th, 2019 (3 participants)

Interview #2: April 11th, 2019 (1 participant)

Focus Group #3: April 16th, 2019 (4 participants)

Interviewer: So, the first question is-- What is each of your religious preferences?

Student A: I'm Episcopalian.

Student B: Protestant, Christian.

Student C: Christian.

Student D: I am a Unitarian Universalist.

Interviewer: Okay, and then does a religious group for your religion exist on campus or close to campus, and if so, would you consider yourself a member?

Student A: Yes, there is one close to campus. No, I would not consider myself a member.

Student B: Yes and no.

Student C: Yes, no.

Student D: Yes, no.

Interviewer: Okay, fairly consistent across the board. Then, how would you yourself define "hate speech"?

Student C: Just anything that denounces anybody's race, color, creed, sexual orientation, religion, anything like that. Just anything that's negative or trying to bash them in a sense that could have been left unsaid.

Student D: Anything that invalidates a person's words because of any factor of their being, whether that is race, sexuality, anything.

Student B: I'm going to make a distinction between the legal definition and the person-to-person definition. Person-to-person definition, I would agree with what you guys have all said.

However, legally, the Supreme Court has refused to recognize as there being a definition of hate speech.

Student A: Yeah, I would say hate speech for the most part is any speech that incites any direct violence against a group. But I would also say that there is something to be said for what has been said about hate speech being speech that defames or defiles another person based on some identifiable factor be it race, religion, creed, sexual orientation. I'm not sure where I land between those two spectrums, but I think I accept both.

Interviewer: Anything anyone would like to add on those? Alright. Then based on each of your responses to that previous question, so you can use your own definition or someone else's, up to you, have you, yourself, experienced hate speech with respect to your religious preference on campus? If so, how?

Student C: Thankfully no, I have not experienced anything like that.

Student A: No, I haven't.

Student B: No, I haven't.

Student D: I've had people thrown off by it 'cause they don't really know what it is, but I haven't actually had people outright say bad things about it.

Interviewer: And then, have you, yourself seen or been aware of any actions by the university to address hate speech on campus, and if so, what have you seen or heard?

Student C: Just when there are racial slurs put in the elevators in Kreischer and Harshman or slurs on the Rock. They take it down pretty quick so that's the action they take as well as mentioning Not In Our Town and stuff like that, those organizations to reiterate that there are programs to talk about diversity, accept it for what it is. That's the actions I've seen the university take in those manners.

Student B: I'm not sure I would I'm not sure if it would be hate speech per say, but I think it falls under the same umbrella. At Halloween there was an incident with members of a fraternity that were wearing costumes that were seen as being cultural appropriation, and from what I know, the university responded to that by sending out a mass email to everybody. Also, with the Gish Theater, they had an incident-- I think they found that the people that of which were named after, they had a racially insensitive past, and they did the same thing.

Student D: I don't, or I haven't stayed to listen to them, but anytime Bible Bob comes, they are pretty open about free speech, so they let him do his thing as long as he is not... I don't know, they let him do his thing. But they also let other people come and talk next to him, which I guess I don't really know what that means. But they haven't really done anything to fully shut him down, I guess. But again, I haven't really stayed to listen to what he's saying. I know that he hasn't said super kind things, but they've let him stay and say his stuff.

Student A: Yeah, I think the university does a good job of calling out hate when it sees it but I also think it does a good job of when you see people that are maybe just crazy people in the oval, they have people there that can just hear them out so that students can know what's hate speech and what's not. Or at least they can know what bad speech is, instead of just condemning it.

Interviewer: Anything anyone wants to add?

Student B: I think that overall, I was a member of an organization on campus called "Young Americans for Liberty" and for them, free speech on campus for open political debate was an issue that was of importance to us. Overall, I think BGSU is a good institution as far as free speech goes.

Interviewer: And then, last question-- do you, yourself have any suggestions on how the university may better address hate speech or diversity and inclusion on campus, and if so, what suggestions do you have?

Student D: I think they already have a good policy as far as how easy it is to make your own organization, so if a group of students sees that a group they want represented is not represented they can easily implement that, so I think that's really beneficial. You just need 10 people and a facilitator, so that's kind of a nice setup for that. I don't know actual steps to be taken. I think the organization method is good and I've seen a lot of representation for a lot of different religious organizations, sexuality, things like that.

Student B: I personally wish the university wouldn't show favoritism to one organization over any other. I've read an article saying that in many instances where universities show favoritism towards a particular, I guess, identity related group, that actually fans the flames of tension on campus with regards to race matters.

Student A: Is there any way you could be more specific about that?

Student B: So, for instance, there are specific groups on campus that represent groups of a particular identity group, if you will. And when the university has an offense, like with the Gish Theater event, I believe that had to do with the Black Student's Union, unless the university is showing attention to all the different organizations on campus, not just identity-related groups, in my opinion I would consider that showing favoritism. I can't remember the article I read, but I read an article that said that when universities approach things in this manner, that actually fans the flames of racial tension.

Student A: Okay, so I hear what you're saying. I would think that the article would have talked about something like the fact that even if, taking the Gish Theater for example, I think that the

university did a pretty good job of saying that there was an open forum and that anyone could attend. I also think that the university does a good job of “See It, Hear It, Report It”.

Student D: Yes, that’s it.

Student A: I don’t know if that’s sexual assault or hate speech.

Student C: All categories, pretty much. There’s a dropdown filter and you can pick.

Student A: I think that that’s a good tool to have in place. I guess the bigger question I might have, and I don’t know if this relates back to the question, is do students who are part of identities that one might consider marginalized, how do they feel on campus? Is safety a concern to them, is it not? Do they feel like they are being represented in discussions about issues that are important to them? So I think, yeah, the university shouldn’t show favoritism to groups of one kind or another.

Student B: They should or they shouldn’t?

Student A: They shouldn’t. What that favoritism is, you and I can talk about, but I think the university does a pretty good job of making sure that any discussions we have about issues like hate speech are pretty well open. It doesn’t seem like they try to cover up-- I mean, it’s kind of hard to cover up if someone writes something on the Rock or if someone writes something in the bathroom, the elevators. So I don’t think they try to hide it, but I think they do do a pretty good job of keeping an open dialogue, and I don’t think they show favoritism to other groups.

Student C: Going off what you said about the dialogue, I know they have a lot of diversity talks, they go to certain res[idence] life halls and talk about diversity and what it means to them and what it feels like to be marginalized and stuff like that. So I think they have a good foundation.

Like you said, they’re hands-on when an incident occurs. They’re not the ones to throw it

underneath the rug so that everybody forgets about it. So, I think they have good procedures and they're on the right track.

Interviewer: Any other suggestions? Do you know how to report hate speech on campus?

Student C: I think that the best they could do is for all incoming freshman-- you know how they make us all take videos on sexual assault or something like that. They could have every freshman coming in watch the videos on that and do a module on that and learn about it. That's one way they could handle it.

Student A: I think it's hard for universities to try and negotiate, or for them to say now we have to teach all of our students how to not expel hate speech. That's not the goal, and it is a bit hyperbolic, but I'm not sure how you solve that issue. I think a lot of it comes down to people just need to know coming into college that you can't be hateful towards other people, and part of that is going to be what do you consider hateful, and how does that dialogue amend itself. So I don't know how you teach students about how to have conversation in a civil way, and how to tell them in an engaged way that what you just said to me, this is how I heard it, and I consider it X, and you need to know that when you talk to other people in my group because it may come off the same way.

Student B: I think that in our culture, I don't think BGSU has been like this, but there's been a culture of there being speakers that people disagree with and rather than confront them in a civil manner, and say "My idea is better than yours and here's why," they shout them down, they block people from entering to listen to them, they turn on fire alarms. This university hasn't been like that. I mean, we haven't had any controversial speakers per say, but I think the university rather than making classes on hate speech and diversity, I think they should have classes on how

to have a civil debate with someone on controversial topics. So I agree with what you're saying [Student A].

Student D: I'd agree with that too. I think, and you can probably agree too, Ann Arbor is more diverse than most of Ohio and Detroit is even more diverse than all of Ohio. But that was honestly kind of a concern of mine when going to Bowling Green was coming from a community that celebrates diversity. I was kind of like "Is this going to be like small town Ohio?" kind of not embracing the same stuff. It's obviously been like that to a lesser degree, but it has done a good job of saying "This is what reality looks like. Reality has differences, reality embraces differences." And I think I've seen a lot of people who come from kind of small town, rural schools thrown off by that, but I think that's a good thing to do in a sense. Showing them that yeah, it's okay to kind of feel like maybe out of your element, but this is how we deal with that in a respectful manner. I think it's done a pretty good job with that. But I like the idea of engaging in discussions, I think that is really important. I think either classes or possible optional programs or other things like that would be beneficial.

Interviewer: Any final comments or thoughts to add? [Participants shake heads no]. Thank you for participating in this discussion.

Letter to the Dean of Students

To the Dean of Students,

For my Honors College capstone project, I studied the reactions of different faith groups to hate speech on Bowling Green State University's campus and the subsequent university responses. My interest in this subject matter began after the rise of anti-Semitic events on campus and in the community, and, as part of one of the minority religions represented on campus, I wondered how others felt about the climate on campus. I also wanted this project to explore dialog between students of different faith backgrounds. In April of 2019, I led three focus groups in a discussion about hate speech and student experiences on campus. Two of the three groups contained a student who identified with a minority religion. All focus groups were asked the same six questions:

1. What is your religious preference?
2. Does a religious group for your religion exist on campus, and if so, would you consider yourself to be a member?
3. How would you, yourself define "hate speech"?
4. Based on your response to the previous questions, have you, yourself experienced hate speech with respect to your religious preference on campus? If so, how?
5. Have you, yourself seen or been aware of any actions taken by the university to address hate speech on campus? If so, what?
6. Do you, yourself have any suggestions on how the university may better address hate speech on campus? If so, what?

Of the nine participants, only two of the students had experienced any negative bias incidents.

However, neither student felt these incidents qualified as hate speech, as they felt the comments

came from a place of ignorance, rather than hate. Overall, the students seemed satisfied with the University's responses to hate speech on campus. Students mentioned Not In Our Town, the BGSU Bias Reporting System, and social media responses to incidents that have occurred on campus.

Despite the overall approval of university policies, students still had recommendations for improvement. One such recommendation was to send out emails about major holidays celebrated by the different faith groups represented on campus. Occasionally, information about upcoming holidays appears in the daily Campus Update; however, this information only appears if a student organization submits it. This would make it easier for students to learn about the different cultures on campus, as they could read about important events and then attend them if they are interested in learning more. For example, the Office of the Dean of Students or the Division of Inclusion and Belonging could send an email about Ramadan that describes the holiday and traditions. The email could also include links to the Muslim Students' Association so that students could learn more if they wanted to. This would be an easy and inexpensive program to implement; however, its reach would be limited, as it is unlikely that many students, including those who did harbor hateful thoughts, would read these emails.

Another suggestion was to add a module on diversity to the required online training for incoming first years. There is precedent for these types of courses—universities like the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Indiana State University already have implemented such courses by DiversityEdu, a company that creates online programs for students and faculty (“Skills for Inclusive Culture”). However, it could be hard to determine the effectiveness of these courses, as the website does not state what comprehension scores students need to pass. Therefore, several courses may have to be tested before actual implementation to

ensure that they are effective. This could take several years, and more immediate solutions may be more feasible. Students may also resist having to take additional courses before the start of school, and it would be hard to motivate current students to take the course. This solution is also more costly than some of the other recommendations.

The last recommendation was to create a BG Perspective course or hold an event that would promote civil discourse on controversial topics. These ideas are similar to courses already in place for Honors College students, and the event is similar to Great Ideas and Desserts, also an Honors College event. Non-honors sections of the Introduction to Critical Thinking course could be offered to BGSU students outside of the Honors College to fulfill credits as BG Perspective courses. However, this would involve either hiring or training a faculty member to teach the course, which could be costly. An alternative could be events that promote civil discourse held on different topics throughout the year. Students could have discussions in small groups moderated by a facilitator or faculty member. Perhaps a certificate could be offered to those who participate in all the discussions. But, as with the idea of a new course, the University would need to recruit faculty members to lead such events, which may not be feasible.

This letter is not a criticism of university policy—it is merely meant to inform the University of student satisfactions and areas for improvement. Because of the small number of participants, one needs to be careful when generalizing these findings to the entire student body. My hope is that this study will be a stepping-off point for other research on similar topics. I also hope to promote civil conversations between students of different backgrounds about hard topics. It is through these kinds of conversations that all parties involved can gain knowledge and empathy and build a bridge of tolerance.

I have attached the full body of research from my capstone project if you wish to learn more about my background research, methodology, and conclusions. Please let me know if you have any questions about the project or recommendations.

Respectfully,

Rachel Feldman

rfeldma@bgsu.edu

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